# A New Approach to Needs Assessment and Communication to Connect and Collaborate with Faculty

Cindy Elliott
Assistant Librarian, Research Services Team
The University of Arizona Libraries

Jim Martin
Associate Librarian, Research Services Team
The University of Arizona Libraries

Mary Feeney
Associate Librarian, Research Services Team
The University of Arizona Libraries

Ricardo Andrade
Assistant Librarian, Research Services Team
The University of Arizona Libraries

## Introduction

Over the past five years, the University of Arizona (UA) Libraries has implemented two reorganizations to focus on new work for libraries, as well as to address budget constraints. One major change in 2008 was the move away from a direct subject liaison model, in which librarians provided instruction, reference, collection development, and communication to assigned departments. The former subject liaison teams were restructured into more functional-based teams. Instructional efforts were moved to an Instructional Services Team, and the new Research Support Services Team (RSST) was formed. RSST was assigned collection development, connection development – essentially communication with faculty and students – and a new area, content management, which was primarily focused on digital initiatives.

The impact of this change was significant and included challenges. It was an adjustment for librarians who had been doing work a certain way, and the change was not communicated well to departments. Many faculty members had been used to contacting one librarian for a whole suite of services. Now they were uncertain who to contact, or had multiple contacts for different functions. Over the next couple of years, it became clear that the library was losing connections with faculty and students, and some adjusting of this model was needed.

In 2010, the library again began to look at its organizational structure. Because of the growing emphasis on digital initiatives, this work on RSST was moved into a new team – the Scholarly Publishing and Data Management Team – that would focus on the development of digital collections and services. At the same time, there was recognition that making sure the library keeps in touch with the needs of campus and communicates our services and resources to campus were pressing needs and priorities for the library.

The Research Services Team (RST) was formed and assigned as its highest priority work the coordination of communication, scanning and needs assessment activities of the UA's academic and research units. More specifically, the highest priority work for the team is two-way communication with UA instructional and research units and the assessment of their needs, as these inform all of the libraries other services. RST's work also includes collection management and coordination of in-depth reference.

Since RST had a new focus, a project team was appointed to determine how to accomplish the work of scanning, needs assessment, and communication. One premise of the project team was that in order for the Libraries to succeed in meeting the needs of our customers, we must engage in effective ongoing two-way communication with our campus constituencies that results in an in-depth understanding of campus priorities, trends, directions and needs.

The project team was charged with developing a plan and implementing an ongoing, sustainable system to assess the needs of UA academic and research units related to research and instruction. This was to be done in collaboration and consultation with other library teams. As part of that assessment, RST was responsible for analyzing the data collected and making it readily available to Library stakeholders. This knowledge is needed to guide library decisions, planning, and to support the development and assessment of the libraries' products and services.

Assessing user needs and communicating about services and resources is not a new concept for libraries. Liaison librarians have been doing this kind of work in some capacity for years. Huffard (2012) reviewed 111 articles dealing with assessment in academic and research libraries.  This article alone indicates the emphasis on assessment in academic libraries and the many different approaches and expected outcomes. The article, “Academic library liaison programs: four case studies” highlights the multiple roles of liaison librarians, including communication using different methods and also being involved in assessment activities (Henry 2012).

In addition there are several examples of how assessment is implemented at other libraries. For example, the University of Washington Libraries (2013) has an assessment group that identifies user needs, conducts surveys of faculty and students, and assesses the Libraries’ efforts at meeting them, and Duke Libraries (2013) has an Assessment Team that implements user surveys such as LibQual and conducts other user studies.

The difference in the UA Libraries’ experience is that we needed to develop a scalable and systematic method to conduct both needs assessment and communication for the whole library outside of a traditional liaison model. The plan needed to consider not only collaboration and consultation with others in the library, but also how RST would be able to assess and communicate with a large research community. In addition, we needed to use what we learned from our customers to identify unmet needs, as well as opportunities for the library. Mathews (2012) discusses the idea to “pull information in from other domains and then evaluate our potential involvement. We need to spend time understanding a community before assuming its needs.”

This paper will describe the development of these plans, including our timeline and strategies. It will also describe RST’s framework for accomplishing this work, including the designation of “College Coordinators,” who are responsible for the environmental scanning of each college and connecting with faculty and students through needs assessment and communication activities with the departments in the colleges. We also share results of our implementation to date, as well as discuss challenges and best practices.

# Development of Plans

A project team was formed to address the need for ongoing and systematic environmental scanning and needs assessment of academic and research units at the UA. The project team also was charged with developing a communication plan.

Through engagement with library stakeholders, including team leaders and librarians and staff throughout the library, the project team developed a detailed timeline and plan for conducting needs assessment. Part of that process was identification of seven broad areas for data and information needed by the library:

- Campus information
- Information resources
- Instructional services
- Library services
- Scholarly publishing and data management
- Customer satisfaction
- Customer behaviors

Some of this data and information was already being collected and analyzed by library teams and summarized in their team reports and team environmental scans. We identified additional existing sources for this type of information. Figure 1 provides examples of what types of information could be gathered and how.

Figure 1: Data sources and approaches for gathering information

| | Data and information needed | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Data sources and approaches for gathering information** | Campus Information | Information Resources | Instructional Services | Library Services | Scholarly Communication & Data Management | Customer Satisfaction | Customer Behaviors |
| Use data for information resources | | x | x | x | | | x |
| LibQual survey | | x | x | x | x | x | |
| UA Website | x | | | | | | |
| Environmental scans from library's strategic planning team | x | x | x | x | x | | |
| Library report card feedback | | x | x | x | x | x | |
| University data sources | x | | | | | | |
| Research consultations | x | x | x | x | x | x | x |
| Instructional consultations | x | x | x | x | x | x | x |
| Course feedback | | | x | | | | |
| Interviews | x | x | x | x | x | x | x |
| Surveys | | x | x | x | | x | |
| Focus groups | | x | x | x | x | x | x |
| User observations | | | | x | | | x |

We also identified key stakeholders from whom to gather information about campus needs, trends, and priorities, including:

- Faculty members and/or graduate students in departments or research areas that are a University focus in the UA Strategic Plan
- Faculty members and/or graduate students who are teaching or researching within a college's area of focus, as identified in the college strategic areas
- Faculty and/or graduate students who have received teaching or research awards

- Distinguished professors who have been recognized by the University for their commitment and outstanding contributions to undergraduate education.
- Regents' professors who have been honored by the University for their outstanding ability and achieved national and international distinction.
- Representation from each college within our scope
- Representation from new UA initiatives such as the Confluence Center
- High profile faculty featured in the UA News or other media outlets
- Faculty or staff who coordinate instruction or research in their units
- Faculty who coordinate Graduate Programs and Undergraduate Programs in their units
- Board members of graduate and professional students and undergraduate student governance groups

In addition to identifying to whom and how we would reach out for needs assessment, we decided that at least once per year, RST should compile snapshots of each academic college we serve. The College Snapshots would include information about strategic areas for each college, new faculty members, new programs and degrees, and new grants. They would also include background information such as data about enrollment, department rankings, and a schedule of upcoming accreditation and academic program reviews for departments in the college. One purpose of the snapshots is to provide background information to librarians who will be conducting interviews and other needs assessment activities. The process of compiling the snapshots is also a way to identify key faculty members and others to contact. Perhaps most importantly, the snapshots would also be a place to identify potential opportunities for the library, based on the information in the scans.

A significant portion of the needs assessment and scanning plan is a timeline noting key activities to accomplish on a monthly basis. Much of the timeline was arranged around the library's strategic planning cycle and the academic calendar for faculty and students. For example, RST would determine in August of each year what needs assessment activities to undertake for the fall semester. The majority of interviews with faculty members and other campus stakeholders should take place during the peak of the fall semester – September, October, November – and spring semester – February, March, April. Information learned during the fall interviews, along with the College Snapshots completed during the summer, feed into the Libraries' strategic planning that takes place in late fall and early spring. We also noted in our timeline that it is important to report out regularly to the rest of the library, at least quarterly, but more often when we learn about important opportunities.

The project team also developed a communication plan. While needs assessment is one aspect of overall communication, plans were documented separately, but with complementary timelines. The communication plan identified audiences, broad messages to be communicated such as new library services and resources, and various methods for communicating with our constituents. In the timeline for this plan, we noted that RST would determine the messages on which to focus over the coming year and create communication action plans for each of those messages. The communication action plans detail the who, what, when, and how of each message.

One of the critical elements to successfully accomplish the work outlined in the needs assessment/scanning and communication plans was to have a framework and process for its implementation. The project team recommended that each librarian on RST be designated as a "College Coordinator" for one or more academic colleges and research units:

- College of Agriculture and Life Sciences
- College of Architecture and Landscape Architecture
- College of Education
- College of Engineering
- College of Fine Arts
- College of Humanities
- College of Optical Sciences
- College of Science
- College for Social and Behavioral Sciences
- Eller College of Management
- Office of the Vice President for Research

Each college coordinator would be responsible for ensuring that scanning, needs assessment, and communication for their designated colleges takes place, within the parameters of the overall Needs Assessment/Scanning and Communication Plans. Scanning activities include reading the college strategic plan and departmental planning documents, being aware of accreditation visits and academic program reviews for departments in the college, compiling college snapshots, and regularly reading department and college news. Needs assessment and communication responsibilities include coordinating interviews and other needs assessment activities with faculty and students in their assigned colleges and communicating information from the library to those colleges and departments.

## Implementation

The Needs Assessment team used the criteria for determining key stakeholders identified above along with the College Snapshot information to compile a list of faculty, staff and administrators to interview. In collaboration with the Dean of the Libraries, the team held lunch meetings with key administrators, library champions, and campus opinion leaders to discuss what libraries can do to meet changing campus needs, gain insight into faculty perception of library services and ideas to shape the academic library of the future. In addition to meetings held with the Dean of Libraries, the implementation team identified individual faculty members across campus to interview and with whom to share information about the library.

Each librarian on RST contacted and interviewed faculty and graduate students and reported findings back to the team for further discussion. Together, the team determined at the beginning of the fall semester which important areas we should assess and developed interview questions related to those areas. For example, this academic year, we included questions about any challenges faculty might be having related to grants, as well as general questions about how their disciplines are changing and what kind of support their students need.

The team developed five interview questions for the faculty and graduate student audiences (see Figure 2), an initial request-for-interview email template, and some key communication points to share with the interviewees during the meetings. Each librarian had roughly 15 people assigned to contact and interview during the semester. The team as a whole contacted 87 faculty and graduate students and met with 50% of the faculty members in 30 different departments during the Fall 2012 semester. During each meeting, the interviewer would discuss the five questions with the interviewee and share library-related information. The interviews were summarized and brought back to the team for discussion. This process allowed our team to discover common issues and needs amongst faculty and surface gaps in service. These conversations helped guide discussions about when, where, and how the library can strategically provide support to our customers in the near and/or long-term.

Figure 2: Example Questions and Follow-up Questions for Interviews with Faculty

| Questions for Faculty | Suggested Follow-ups/Prompts | Information to Share |
|---|---|---|
| How/where are you most successful in getting the information that you need? What are the barriers you face to finding useful information? | Ask about resources faculty are using that are user-friendly or helpful. What services do they use to get the resources we don’t have? | Discovery tools, non-text reference tools |
| Where do you see your field heading or changing? | Follow-ups will be more discipline-specific, bringing in knowledge about colleges and departments. | |
| What would help support your research and teaching and/or support your students? | If the faculty member focuses on research, ask about teaching support and vice versa. | Talk about library services: instructional, data, in-depth reference assistance; resource purchase requests |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| What are your biggest challenges related to grants in the next few years? | If the faculty member doesn't mention data management as part of the grants process, ask about it; if the faculty member doesn't mention finding grant opportunities as an issue, ask how they go about identifying grant opportunities. | Ideas for grants project (e.g., website/toolkit, etc.); Data Management Plans |

# Findings

Out of these meetings, several major needs and opportunities arose for the library to consider for future strategic development: graduate student specific assistance, library communication, student/faculty engagement in the scholarly process, data management planning and grant support, and preservation of digital materials. The top five most common challenges noted by faculty and graduate students in the one-on-one meetings were:

1) Students lack research skills. Faculty across all disciplines feel that students lack information literacy skills and often don't research beyond Google.
2) Faculty need more options for online learning; embedding materials in the course management system, streaming video, mobile applications.
3) Faculty and students need a centralized system for information literacy, including more tutorials and testing. Students at all levels and new faculty can't cut through the information overload to find the resources they need.
4) Faculty see a real need for leadership on data management on campus, as granting agencies and journals are now requiring data management plans.
5) Library must continue to engage with key faculty. Face-to-face communication is the most direct way to engage our customers. Faculty are unaware of library services and research tools even though those services and resources have been publicized.

The majority of interviews with faculty members and campus stakeholders took place during the peak of the fall semester. The initial plans included a timeline noting key activities to accomplish each month. Much of the timeline was arranged around the library's strategic planning cycle, as well as the academic calendar for faculty and students. The Needs Assessment team shared College Snapshots in September, and shared interview findings in December.

## Best Practices

During the current spring semester, the team faced several challenges and developed best practices for future implementations of this process. RST had to delay implementation of the communication plan due to internal staffing resources. The team had identified a few key areas to communicate to various constituents on campus such as information about our patron-driven acquisition program and promotion of new databases to relevant departments. The team plans to make this a priority in the coming months for implementation in the Fall 2013 semester.

The team did not realize how difficult it would be to get on busy faculty members' schedules. Many faculty members responded that they would not be able to meet for several weeks after initial contact, and the team needed to accommodate for this in our internal schedule. The team discovered that faculty members were responsive in the beginning of the semester and difficult to reach towards the end of the semester, which made following a specific timeline more challenging.

One thing the team learned was that it was useful to establish clear expectations in the interviews with faculty members. When a librarian met with a faculty member, the librarian made it clear that that the library may not act on all or any of the suggestions made, but that we would listen and be good stewards of the information given to us and share it with the appropriate parties at the library.  By listening first to what the customer has to say, we provide a venue for the customer to share success stories and challenges, and make specific requests. The end goal is that we develop trust and rapport with our customers sufficient to build stronger relationships between the library and the colleges. These enhanced connections will allow our customers to provide us regular feedback and help us provide regular communication back to them.

## Conclusion

The college scanning activities and the personal interviews with faculty increased RST's understanding of campus priorities, which include investing in infrastructure and personnel to increase the University's research efforts and providing more opportunities for faculty to collaboratively work across all disciplines. This information helped inform the development of the team's grant support project, whose goal is to position the library to better support faculty members' ability to find and successfully apply for funding to support their teaching and research.  In addition, there were immediate benefits simply from making the personal connections with faculty. Many faculty members expressed how grateful they were that librarians were reaching out to them and were happy to now have a connection in the library. Connections resulting from these interviews have also resulted in the development of partnerships between RST and high-profile initiatives on campus such as the Office of Technology Transfer commercialization effort.

The interviews also resulted in opportunities for other teams in the library. For example, information about library services provided during the interviews prompted several faculty members to arrange for consultations with the UA Libraries' Data Management Librarian. Another specific example emerged from the interviews with faculty in the department of Nutritional Sciences. Questions related to information sources needed by students to be successful resulted in additional meetings with the Associate Deans in the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences. These meetings in turn developed into new opportunities for the UA Libraries' Instructional Services Team to provide online instruction at the college level. As RST shares what we learn from the interviews and environmental scans with the rest of the Library, we also demonstrate our active involvement in contributing to the success of key campus initiatives.

One of the challenges inherent in such an effort is determining collaborative priorities for RST, a team with six librarians, and the UA Libraries at a University with over 38,000 full-time equivalent (FTE) students and 2,500 FTE faculty. Every new opportunity requires librarians to invest time in pursuing development of ideas and takes time away from other library activities and functional work. What we learn is, at least in part, also dependent on those faculty members who are willing and able to take the time to meet with us. Business as usual, however, dooms us to eventual irrelevance. And the initiative has already resulted in several connections which have raised the profile of RST and the UA Libraries on campus. The college scanning activities also have worked exceptionally well in providing information that helps the team determine what are the priorities within the colleges, and thus guide our identification of key faculty members to interview.

Built into the plan is a regular update of the college scans. This helps the team determine how changes in the University environment might impact whom we choose to interview next. A regular review of this process by RST ensures that this methodology is feasible for the librarians and is having the desired result of identifying key campus initiatives and stakeholders in those programs. UA Libraries' administration also plays a key role in arranging for conversations with College Deans and other high profile members of the campus administration. RST also continues to work within the UA Libraries to ensure we are aware of and can accurately describe any new initiatives and services being undertaken by our library colleagues.

Librarians who work at academic libraries are increasingly faced with challenges all-too-familiar to librarians working in special libraries. Namely, how to continually demonstrate one's value and that of the library to clients and customers with limited resources. The strategy discussed in this paper could be applicable in many special library environments: actively identify the top priorities for the company or organization, identify key people involved in these initiatives, and then reach out to those individuals. This provides the opportunity not only to demonstrate – preferable in person – how existing library services and resources could benefit them, but also to explore potential collaborations or new ventures to address unmet needs. While it may never be possible to fully pursue all of the possible ideas that may emerge, proactively assessing needs demonstrates the library's initiative and highlights librarians' contributions to the university mission. As Mathews (2012) states, "instead of focusing on the discrete fixed role that libraries currently fulfill, assessment can guide us in new directions." Considered as an investment, it has the potential to pay dividends as librarians increase their connections to key players in their organization and develop a deeper understanding of how their organization functions.

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